

Promised Land/ Cursed Land: The peculiar Canada of Mathias Carvalho

Albert Braz

*Canada! ...Canada is so far away,
it almost doesn't exist.*

Jorge Luis Borges

Resumo: Os *Poemas americanos 1: Riel* (1886) apresentam uma imagem muito idiossincrática do Canadá. Como o seu título sugere, o livro foca principalmente a vida do político-místico que foi enforcado como traidor em 1885. Além disso, no processo de representar Riel, não como um nacionalista Métis mas como um nacionalista Canadense, Carvalho produz um Canadá que é virtualmente irreconhecível. De fato, visto a estranha caracterização do Canadá pelo poeta, é difícil não suspeitar que a sua “eminência boreal, sagrada” tem menos a ver com o Canadá do que com o Brasil.

Abstract: Mathias Carvalho's *Poemas americanos 1: Riel* (1886) paints an extremely idiosyncratic portrait of Canada. As its title suggests, the collection focuses mainly on the politician-mystic who was hanged for treason in 1885. However, in the process of portraying Riel, not as a Métis nationalist but as a Canadian one, Carvalho presents a Canada that is virtually unrecognizable. Indeed, considering the poet's peculiar characterization, one cannot help but wonder if his “eminência boreal, sagrada” is not more about Brazil than about Canada.

For South Americans, as Jorge Luis Borges suggests (qtd. in Manguel), Canada can seem a very distant land, which perhaps explains why so few writers from the region have explored it in their work. One notable exception is Mathias Carvalho. An obscure Brazilian poet who appears to have vanished even from the annals of his own country's literature, Carvalho is the author of the 1886 collection *Poemas americanos 1: Riel*¹. As its subtitle suggests, *Poemas americanos* focuses mainly on Louis Riel, the nineteenth-century Métis politician and mystic who twice led his people against Canada and who was hanged for treason in 1885. So partial is the collection toward Riel, in fact, that it is simultaneously a republican manifesto, an anti-English diatribe, and a paean to pan-American solidarity. Moreover, in the process of eulogizing the Métis leader not just as an archetypal New World liberator but also as a Canadian patriot, Carvalho produces a Canada that is almost unrecognizable. Indeed, considering Carvalho's peculiar characterization of Canada, one cannot help but wonder if his work is not less about the "eminência boreal, sagrada" (24) than about the poet's own country, Brazil.

Poemas americanos is set against the backdrop of the U.S. Civil War. As the South and North clash, what Carvalho calls "O Mal e o Bem," the slaves over whose fate they are ostensibly fighting dream of a haven to which they can escape, a sanctuary where they can regain their humanity. For those "aleijões do Mundo Novo" (20) there is only one hope, that vast land to the north:

*O Canadá... as pobres mães diziam
Como um suspiro ao ouvido dos filhinhos!
O Canadá... dizia o pai cansado a pae cançado
Para os filhos robustos, apontando
A salvação lá no horizonte..., ao longe!*

¹*Poemas americanos* was recently rediscovered and published in a bilingual Portuguese-French edition by Jean Morisset. Although this version has numerous typographical errors — such as condemnal-a (13), "emtanto" (26), and "ohlar" 52 — all quotations are reproduced as printed by Morisset, since I have not been able to consult Carvalho's original edition.

E começaba a caravana, o Exôdo
Dos martyres — cujo sonho
Todo — no Canadá se concentrava. (24)

Unfortunately for the slaves, they are in for a great disillusionment. After they begin their journey northward, they discover that they will not be able to find shelter across the border, since “O Canadá – jaz em prisão terrível.” Canada, they learn, is not a sovereign country but a colony, a victim of British imperialism. In other words, rather than being a promised land for the oppressed of the world, Canada is itself oppressed. It is an ill-fated land completely dominated by those perfidious English “lords” (26). As the poet asks, “Que fôra... a salvação da gente escrava/ Se o Norte da União perdesse a guerra!” They would have been the victims of an even greater slavery, he answers, since there would have been no possibility of an external rescue (30).

It is at such a critical moment in the history of both Canada and the New World that Riel surfaces. The future Métis leader enters the scene like “um clarão de uma voragem” and soon discerns that misery and injustice reign not only in his homeland but in the whole of the Americas. After the “ar dos livres lhe entrou no seio,” he also comes to the realization that “podia/ Salvar a pátria pelo combate” and “Armas pediu à natureza” (32). Then, inspired by “redemptora voz” of Benito Juárez and other pan-American emancipators, he begins to envisage the day when “o Privilégio” will finally be vanquished by the “filhos da Razão.” As Riel shouts to the continent, “Avançai... para diante!/ As armas empunhai! vos toca a vossa vez” (40, 38). Or as he hears in a “moderno canto” emanating from France, the “grande mãe do futuro” and birthplace of the Marseillaise, “O tyranno é o inimigo!” and thus for the peoples of the Americas there is only one option, “A liberdade – ou nada!” (42, 44, 46)

Riel is, of course, ultimately defeated, “assassinado” by the British. Yet the resistance by the “Homem do Norte em que ninguém pensára” (48) is not in vain, for his struggle against imperialism earns him an illustrious place in the pantheon of New World heroes. Along

with the Brazilian protonationalist Tiradentes and the U.S. abolitionist John Brown, Riel constitutes a “Triade americana.” To quote Carvalho:

*Tiradentes e Brown e RIEL são figuras
D'exemplos immortaes, erguidos nas alturas
Do sentimento humano, onde podem subir
Os grandes corações, videntes do porvir!
Somente o Amor da Patria esses gigantes cria;
Nos peitos d'essa mãe bebem toda energia
Que faz a fonte erguida os raios afrontar,
Ir n'um fraco batel ás solidões do mar!
Que leva o ohlar sublime a cravar-se no espaço,
Tendo ao lado as traições e bem junto o baraço
Que vem da escuridão onde rasteja o algoz!
Do espaço arrebatat tanta luz para nós! (52)*

At a time when much of the continent struggles under foreign or local tyranny, they are titans motivated by nothing but the desire to eradicate the endemic hunger and oppression that have become the “vergonha do solo americano” (28).

As even such a cursory description should indicate, Carvalho's portrait of Riel in *Poemas americanos*, like that of Canada, is clearly an idiosyncratic one. There are many aspects of the characterization of the Métis leader that one could contest, but I will address only what I consider the two most conspicuous ones: his ideology and his nationality. As I mentioned above, Riel owes his notoriety to his pivotal role in two watershed events in Canadian history – the Red River Resistance of 1869-70 and the North-West Rebellion of 1885. A French-speaking, Catholic Métis, Riel was born in 1844 in Saint Boniface, Red River Settlement – present-day Winnipeg. In 1868, after abruptly ending his divinity studies in Montreal,² he became the leader of the local forces that were beginning to resist the sale of the North-West by the Hudson's Bay Company to the new Canadian Confederation. With the eventual failure of that campaign, Riel was forced to seek exile

² There is still much debate as to whether Riel voluntarily left the Collège de Montréal (Siggins 62) or was expelled (Flanagan 20).

in the United States. However, some fifteen years later, he was asked by the Saskatchewan Valley Métis to return north and prepare a list of grievances to present to the Canadian government. Yet once more the initial political protest led to a military confrontation with Ottawa, a conflict that eventually culminated in Riel's hanging for treason at Regina, on November 16, 1885.³

At the heart of Riel's confrontations with the Canadian government were deep political and cultural issues. After all, the transfer of the North-West was not merely a commercial transaction but "la vente et l'achat" of a people (Groulx 4). That being said, particularly in 1885, Riel was not absorbed just with political matters. As befits someone who came to believe that God had anointed him "prophet of the new world" (Riel, III 261), he was determined to reform religious institutions as much as secular ones. One of Riel's central concerns at Batoche was not to devise a military strategy to defeat the coming Canadian forces but to relocate a revitalized Catholic Church from Rome to Winnipeg. Convinced that fashionable liberal ideas were about to turn the Vatican into a "ville d'ateliers et de boutiques", he concluded that the only way the Catholic Church could save itself was by relocating to the Americas. He actually decided to move the Holy See to his own hometown, Saint Boniface, and to appoint one of his mentors as the new pope (Riel, III 144-7).

Needless to say, this is one aspect of Riel one never encounters in *Poemas americanos*. Carvalho does acknowledge that "RIEL tinha visões!" But the Métis leader's dreams are distinctly secular, dominated by idea of progress and "novos ideaes da civilização" (38). Judging by Carvalho's characterization, one would be unlikely to suspect that, as a recent critic rightly claims, Riel embodies not only "a narrative of liberation but also an eruption of the colonial and the feudal" (Hart 164).

³ Both Flanagan and Siggins provide good introductions to Riel, but probably the best single volume on the subject remains George E. G. Stanley's *The Birth of Western Canada*.

That is, rather than being the epitome of Republicanism and liberalism, Riel is a social and religious traditionalist who passionately supports the Conservative Party of Sir John A. Macdonald – the party that ironically was so instrumental in hanging him – and who contends that “Le Métis comprend que l’église/ Est Reine á la tête de tout” (IV 320). In short, instead of striving to eradicate the monarchy, he wishes to perpetuate it. In his words, “Celui que le monde attendait dans la personne d’Henri-cinq se trouve dans le Prophète du nouveau-monde, Louis ‘David’ Riel qui par sa mère Julie de la Gimodière est un des princes descendants de Louís XI” (III, 209).

Even more curious than Carvalho’s portrayal of Riel as a champion of republicanism and liberalism is the nationality he ascribes to the self-described David of the New World. History is clearly fluid, as Riel’s own posthumous reputation exemplifies. After being hanged for treason and initially being depicted as a treacherous rebel, he has now been transformed into an “icon” of Canadianness by the descendants or at least “héritiers spirituels” of the people who killed him (Braz, “Absent Protagonist” 59; Morisset, “Louis Riel” 50). Still, despite all the inevitable contradictions when a former enemy is metamorphosed into an ancestor, most writers on Riel tend to concede that his antagonists were Canadian. They may have been misguided, reflecting their Eurocentric cultural chauvinism, but they were definitely Canadian. In fact, more than one writer has suggested that at the root of the two North-West conflicts was a clash between Métis and Canadian nationalisms, as the Métis and their allies “rose in arms against Canadian intrusion and the imposition of an alien civilization” (Stanley xxv).

Carvalho, however, complicates this scenario tremendously by presenting Riel, not as a Métis, but as a Canadian. As he writes in the preface to *Poemas americanos*, Riel is “o destemido lutador da independencia do Canadá.” He is a “martyr da mais sagrada das causas – a liberdade da patria” (16). The problem, though, is that if Riel is a Canadian patriot, those who battle him must not be. This leads Carvalho

to efface Confederation. In a work presumably about Canadian national pride and independence, he never acknowledges the events of 1867. For Carvalho, Riel's enemy is not Confederation but "a Inglaterra," which brazenly kills the Métis leader in order to "dar ao mundo mais essa prova do seu egoísmo e da sua ferocidade" (16). He definitely gives no indication that his protagonist's nemesis is Canada's very first prime minister, Macdonald, the man the historical Riel describes as a "fou dans les loges./ (orangistes)" as well as "Un homme sans parole" and "un homme vulgaire" (IV 223, 234).

Of course, one possibility is that when Carvalho refers to Canada he really means French-speaking Canada, *le Canada*; or, to use today's terms, Quebec. This is the suggestion made by Carvalho's editor and translator Jean Morisset. A Quebec geographer who has written extensively on Riel as an "écrivain américain," Morisset asserts that, in his collection, "Carvalho inscrit d'emblée l'histoire du Canada, c'est-à-dire du Québec, dans le grand mouvement d'émancipation des Amériques!" Morisset deplors the contemporary appropriation of Riel as a national hero by what he terms "une *British America* devenue fallacieusement Canada" ("Avant-propos" 11-12). Still, despite his apparent desire to incorporate Riel into the larger Franco-American family, he cannot ignore the fact that it was the Franco-Catholic elites that first demonized the Métis leader as other, as an *anti-Canadian* apostate. To cite the testimony of the Franco-Catholic clergy in Saskatchewan, Riel was not only au "HOMME NÉFASTE" and "UN MALIN ESPRIT," "notre ANTE CHRIST", but he considered French Canadians "CANAILLES" (Grandin 7, 15, 24).⁴ Or as even Morisset admits, "La seule véritable réponse que la Franco-Amérique" has had regarding the Métis leader's guilt or innocence is "la suivante. Oui, Riel était fou. Et non seulement l'était-il, mais il était coupable de l'être" ("Post-face" 94).

⁴ One of the great ironies about Riel, as he noted at his trial, is that while his enemies are striving to prove that he was mentally balanced, "my good friends and lawyers... are trying to show that I am insane" (*Queen* 206).

Another possible explanation for Carvalho's identification of Riel as a Canadian hero, as opposed to a Métis one, is that *Poemas americanos* is not so much about Canada as it is about Brazil. In his essay "Fiction of the Future," Robertson Davies states that "Whatever we write will be contemporary, even if we attempt a novel set in a past age, and put on fancy dress, so to speak, in our prose" (358). Following Davies, perhaps one could also argue that a text is always dominated by local concerns, even if set in another land. It is certainly difficult to avoid the parallels that Carvalho draws throughout his work between the political situation in Canada and that in Brazil. As he declares in the preface, "O Canada ha de libertar-se da escravidão ingleza do mesmo modo que nós nos havemos de libertar da escravidão monarchica" (16). Or as he writes later, both Canada and Brazil are victims of the "maiores ladrões que tem a Europa", an oppression which will cease only when the whole continent is dotted with the "bandeira sagrada da Republica!" (28, 20).

The degree to which Carvalho attempts to establish the affinities between Canada and Brazil is particularly evident in the poem with which he doses his collection, "Nós e o Canadá: Somos do Novo Mundo." To quote its first two stanzas:

*Havemos de chegar á nossa salvação!
Havemos de esmagar a dupla escravidão
Do corpo e do ideal! e a nossa liberdade
Surgirá do trabalho e da nossa vontade.
Temas da Inconfidência o facho oriental!*

*Temos aos nossos pés un immenso tremedal;
Precisamos salta-lo e alcançar o Levante,
Que a Justiça nos chama ao Sinai trovejante!
Podemos soltar o fogo salvador
Das arêas do Prata ás linhas do Equador!" (54)*

"Nós e o Canadá" draws attention to the retributive streak in Carvalho, the conviction that there will soon be a moment of reckoning in which all the personal and social injuries inflicted on the peoples of the New World

will be “vingados” (56).⁵ But, as the allusion to the “Inconfidencia” illustrates, it also underscores the extent to which republicanism permeates *Poemas americanos*.

For Carvalho, monarchism is not an ideology, however anachronistic, but an abomination, a sin against “o Progresso” (26). Therefore, he feels free to laud anyone he believes has been the victim of monarchic persecution, even if he obviously does not know much about that individual’s life. This perhaps explains how in a work that focuses on the need of the peoples of the Americas to liberate themselves from oppression, be it colonialism or imperialism, its protagonist is completely dissociated from his people, the Métis. Indeed, Carvalho transforms Riel into a freedom fighter for the very polity that battled and eventually hanged him, “Le canada/ Dont le génie avait tâché de nous détruire” (Riel, IV 118).

⁵ Incidentally, this is a characteristic Carvalho shares with his subject. See Albert Braz’s “The Vengeful Prophet: Revenge in Louis Riel’s Writings.”

Works cited

- BRAZ, Albert. "The Absent Protagonist: Louis Riel in Nineteenth-Century Canadian Literature." *Canadian Literature* 167 (2000): 45-61.
- _____. "The Vengeful Prophet: Revenge in Louis Riel's Writings." *Dalhousie French Studies* 35 (1996): 19-32.
- CARVALHO, Mathias. *Poemas americanos I: Riel. Louis Riel: poèmes américains*. Ed. and trans. Jean Morisset. Trois Pistoles, Quebec: Éditions Trois-Pistoles, 1997. 15-57.
- DAVIS, Robertson. "Fiction of the Future." *The Merry Heart: Selections 1980-1995*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1996. 353-71.
- FLANAGAN, Thomas. *Louis "David" Riel: "Prophet of the New World"*. Rev. ed. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1996.
- GRANDIN, Vital, et al., *Le véritable Riel*. Montreal: Imprimerie générale, 1887.
- GROULX, Lionel. *Louis Riel et les événements de la Rivière-Rouge en 1869-70*. Montreal: l'Action nationale, 1944.
- HART, Jonathan. "Translating and Resisting Empire: Cultural Appropriation and Postcolonial Studies." *Borrowed Power: Essays on Cultural Appropriation*. Ed. Bruce Ziff and Pratima Rao. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers UP, 1997. 137-68.
- MANGUEL, Alberto. "Borges Still Failed by English Translators." Rev. of Jorge Luis Borges, *Collected Poems*, trans. Andrew Hurley. *Globe and Mail* 17 October 1998: D9.

MORISSET, Jean. "Avant-propos" and "Postface: Louis Riel, écrivain des Amériques." Carvalho 9-13 and 61-122.

____ "Louis Riel: écrivain politique, écrivain des Amériques." *Écriture et politique*. Ed. Gratien Allaire, Gilles Cadrin, and Paul Dubé. Edmonton: Institut de recherche de la Faculté Saint-Jean, 1989. 47-55.

The Queen v. Louis Riel. Ed. Desmond Morton. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1974.

RIEL, Louis. *The Collected Works of Louis Riel/ Les écrits complets de Louis Riel*. 5 vols. Gen. Ed. George EG. Stanley. Edmonton: U of Alberta P, 1985.

SIGGINS, Maggie. *Riel: A Life of Revolution*. Toronto: HarperPerennial, 1995.

STANLEY, George F. G. *The Birth of Western Canada: A History of the Riel Rebellions* [1936]. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1992.